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Leibold, James, "Sheep in Wolves' Clothing? The Book the Han Nationalists Love to Loath" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 693.

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Sheep in Wolves' Clothing? The Book the Han Nationalists Love to Loath

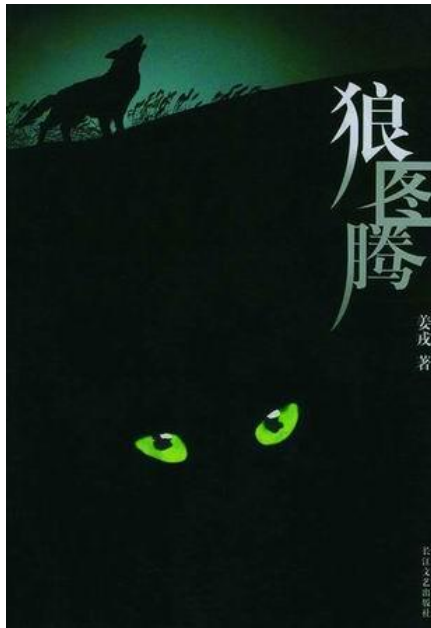
January 7, 2010 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

By James Leibold

"The publication of this book and its praise by famous personalities is actually preparing public opinion for the carrying out of racial genocide against the Han."

—Zhao Fengnian (赵丰年) writing on [Hanwang](#) 汉网, 17 Dec 2008

What book could cause one Chinese netizen to “shiver with fear from head to toe” and others to suggest that the Han people might once again face genocide? *Wolf Totem* (狼图腾), the semi-autobiographical polemic of Han author Lü Jiamin 吕嘉民 (aka Jiang Rong 姜戎) and his confessional self-awakening about the beauty, strength and freedom of the Mongolian steppe and its lupine culture.



Despite the heated public debate this 2004 novel has generated on the Chinese mainland—with its estimated twenty million pirated and legal copies inviting comparison with Mao’s “Little Red Book”—*Wolf Totem* has generated surprisingly little academic analysis in the West. Here [The China Beat](#) has yet again proven a trailblazer, offering a number of thoughtful reviews and helpful links to other discussions on the Internet.

The book’s diverse themes (the struggle for freedom, ecological destruction, man versus nature, clash of cultures, and martial valor) help to explain, at least partially, its mass appeal and disparate interpretations, with the judging panel of the inaugural [Man Asia Literary Prize](#), for example, praising *Wolf Totem*’s “passionate argument about the complex interrelationship between nomads and settlers, animals and human beings, nature and culture,” while the novel’s Chinese editor noted its attraction among “women who want their men to be more like wolves and MBA students who want to learn more wolfishness in business.”

In what follows, I seek to take the discussion in a slightly different direction by suggesting that the novel and its 50,000-character epilogue invite reconsideration of the place of Han identity (汉族, 汉民族, 汉人) within Chinese society and the increasing fragility of “multiculturalism with Chinese characteristics.” In the Anglophone world, Han is often used uncritically as a synonym for “Chinese,”

while those who have studied the “nationalities question” (民族问题) in the West argue that “Han” functions as an “empty” or “residual” category for all those “Chinese” who *are not* one of the “backward” yet colorful, singing and dancing minorities.

MORE THAN AN EMPTY SIGNIFIER

But *Wolf Totem* and much of the Sinophone debate it has sparked is specifically related to the nature and scope of Han identity within Chinese society. Here, like the 1988 documentary *River Elegy* (河殇), *Wolf Totem* offers a scathing critique of the conservative and servile nature of sedentary Han culture, with several critics arguing they are essentially “brothers born of the same parents” (同胞兄弟). Yet *Wolf Totem* shifts the Han people’s succor from the dynamic “blue ocean” culture of the West to the wild, nomadic “wolf spirit” (狼性) of the steppe.

In his long and didactic epilogue, which was excluded from Howard Goldblatt’s Penguin translation, Lü Jiamin argues that a unique steppe-sown dialectic has propelled Chinese civilization forward over the last 5000 years, with the steppe’s nomadic races (Jurchens, Mongols, Manchus, etc.) providing the docile, insular, and sheep-like Han race with regular, re-invigorating “blood infusions” (输血) from the dynamic, martial, and democratic wolf spirit.

This highly essentialized re-imaging of Chinese history explicitly bifurcates “Chineseness” into a sedentary/Han/sheep versus nomadic/Mongol/wolf dyad, rendering any notion of shared national identity highly problematic. In fact, the author publically chastised Goldblatt for glossing Han as Chinese on the first page of his translated novel, for it pastes over the deep divisions of race and culture which are central to his iconoclastic re-construction of Chinese history and identity.

COAGULATED COHESION

Several commentators have rightly labeled Lü Jiamin’s narrative as “fascism” or “crypto-fascist.” But this blood and ecological based dialectic is deeply rooted in the mindset of modern Chinese intellectuals. Leading late Qing and Republican-era thinkers, including those as diverse as Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, identified race mixing (or in Sun’s words the “smelting together in a single furnace” (融而入于一炉) as the ultimate solution to China’s lack of national cohesion.

The influential bilingual author Lin Yutang 林语堂, for example, argued that the strength and continuity of Chinese civilization was built on the periodic “infusion of new blood,” which, in his words, acted like “a kind of phylogentic monkey-gland grafting” and resulted in “a new bloom of culture after each introduction of new blood” as the civilized and comfortable lifestyle of the Han people “render them helpless at the hands of a fresher and more war-like race.”

Today, most Chinese intellectuals avoid any direct reference to blood or race, but the natural and non-violent process of “fusion” (融合) remains the touchstone of the CCP’s long-term solution to the nationalities question. As a sort of “coagulated-core” (凝聚核心) or rolling “snowball” (雪球), the magnetic Han majority and its magnanimous Confucian culture continue to draw the small and scattered minorities together into a harmonious whole—producing the unique “plurality and organic unity” (多元一体) of the Chinese nation/race (中华民族).

In fact, it is the relocation of this racial dynamism to the steppe and its nomadic races that renders *Wolf Totem* so highly controversial. It has led to a healthy dose of criticism in mainstream academic and literary circles and even more heated vitriol in popular online forums.



Supporters of the Hanist movement in Shanghai wearing traditional "Han clothing" (汉服).

In particular, a small but increasingly vocal group of Han racial nationalists view Lü's book as a sort of nomadic version of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion": a secret plot to handover power and authority in China to the Mongols, Manchus and other nomadic minorities, thereby undermining and eventually destroying the inherent superiority and centrality of the Han race and its 5000 year-old civilization.

Arguing that Han is more than an empty or meaningless category, the Hanists seek to revitalize "Han" culture and identity while redirecting patriotic anger towards the lurking "enemy within." The "Han revivalist movement" (汉民族复兴运动) is a broad church, so to speak, attracting Chinese youth with a wide variety of interests and needs; yet the online campaign against *Wolf Totem* reveals some of the more extreme elements of this movement.

THE HOWL OF THE HAN SHEEP

Take, for example, the nearly 40,000-character reply to Lü Jiamin's epilogue that has been widely circulated on the Chinese Internet. Entitled "[A Han Person's Howl: An Angry Critique of *Wolf Totem's* 41 Fallacies](#)," this essay appears to have been first posted on the popular *Hanwang* portal under the pseudonym "The Fierce and Ambitious Flea Scratcher" (扞虱泉雄) in December 2008. This anonymous blogger provides a meticulous, and at times sophisticated (albeit highly repetitive), point-by-point critique to a previously circulated list of 41 reasons for the novel's popularity.

Labeling Lü Jiamin as the unpatriotic "scum of the Han race" (汉人的败类), the blogger argues that the entire book is one long act of flattery to the nomadic races that does not hold up to rational scrutiny and a fact-based reading of Chinese history. Seeking to rouse his fellow Han netizens into action, the book's dangers are personalized: "Han compatriots, we all have mothers. Our race is our common mother, and we absolutely cannot sit by and watch as our good and kind mother is insulted and defiled by others. We must rise in action and beat back the insults of these extreme racists. We must demand blood for blood and an eye for an eye."

Replete with scathing and personal attacks on Lü Jiamin and his "dimwitted command of history," the blogger seeks to demonstrate the scrounging and uncivilized nature of nomadic culture and how the repeated invasion of nomadic races sidetracked Han civilization from its natural path of progression. In

this author's own essentialized reading of history, Song China is depicted as the mainstream of human development and the world's most advanced civilization, possessing 85% of global wealth and placing the Han on the doorstep of capitalism.

Rather than a life-saving transfusion of nomadic blood, the blogger argues that the Mongol empire's thirtieth-century invasion of China was "a case of rape!" (那是强奸): "an unprecedented crime against humanity!" (空前的反人类罪行), which completely destroyed Han civilization and caused China to irrevocably fall behind the West. The Ming dynasty repaired some of the damage, but the Manchu Qing resumed the shameless pilfering of Han society while also opening the doors to foreign imperialism and further humiliation.

Nomadic races like the Mongols and the Manchus are parasites, a group of "weasels" (仓鼠), "crawling bugs" (爬虫) and "uncivilized barbarians" (未开化的野蛮人), incapable of creating any independent civilization and only able to survive on the periodic raping and pillaging of the highly creative and more humane Han civilization. Among the one hundred Chinese inventions identified by Arnold J. Toynbee, how many of them, the author asks, were created by the nomadic races?

In reply to Lü Jiamin's suggestion that the Han people should compensate the indigenous inhabitants of the grasslands for destroying their fragile ecosystem, the blogger cries foul: rather the brutal and heartless natives should pay compensation to the Han for the savage massacre of 60 million Han people. This would amount to US\$75 trillion if one used the minimum standard compensation of 10,000 *yuan* per person, and to a further US\$87 trillion if one took into consideration the damages suffered by the Han economy and emotional pain and suffering caused by these repeated "blood transfusions."

Yet the author repeatedly mocks the current weakness of the steppe nomads: "even if you placed every single blade of your grass, every head of livestock, every felt rug, each piece of animal dung, all your dry goods, every kilometer of your rivers, all the hawks flying in the sky, every wild rabbit, and of course, your most sacred wolves onto the auction table, you still couldn't manage to pay this amount."

Throughout this rambling polemic, the blogger makes repeated mention of the Han people's "valiant spirit" (强悍精神) and "martial spirit" (尚武精神), offering several warnings to Lü Jiamin and the book's supporters: "Remember, barbarians! I will remember my entire life, your peddling of this exceedingly humiliating theory, and insist that the next generation also remember. We did not instigate this racial hatred; rather you forced it upon us. If there comes a day when the flames of our indignant anger burns across the globe, don't blame us! Rather you're asking for it! China cannot be stopped from producing a second [Ran Min 冉闵](#)," the fourth-century Han military leader who is praised by Han racial nationalists as a sort of "[Hitler of Ancient East Asia](#)" for his race-based attacks on the "five barbarian tribes" (五胡).

COLONIAL NECROPHILIA OR THE LUSTFUL BITE OF A WEREWOLF?

But how do the Han racial nationalists explain the vast popularity of *Wolf Totem* among Han readers? Doesn't its massive Han readership validate Lü Jiamin's national imaginary? In another posting on *Hanwang* entitled "[What is the psychology behind those Han people who like *Wolf Totem*](#)," a blogger writing under the pseudonym "Iron" (铁) offers a short story to explain the novel's popularity.

There was once an old palace eunuch who still had sexual desires even though he was no longer able to have sex. He confessed his desires to a beautiful young woman under his charge. The eunuch urged the woman to invite a young man back to her room for sex, and then hide next door and aroused himself by watching their lovemaking through a small peephole in the wall.

Those Han who read and enjoy *Wolf Totem* are no different from this randy eunuch. "What I fear most," Iron writes, "is that those slavish [Han people] without a clue think the eunuch's actions are

completely normal, and instead label the other man's erection as 'Han chauvinism', while taking pleasure in the treachery of the eunuch's 'peep show'."

This author and other Han racial nationalists are tapping into the growing sense of cultural emptiness and social dislocation that has accompanied the rapid modernization and Westernization of Reform-era China. Several have noted how the commodification of minority cultures is increasingly driven by frontier exoticism and sex tourism with, in [Nicole Barnes'](#) words, the "fear of emasculation driv[ing] Han men to their nation's cultural frontier in an existential search for virility and assertiveness."

This type of "internal Orientalism" is certainly not unique to China, where the love of colonized peoples and their exotic/erotic cultures functions as a form of "colonial necrophilia" in the words of Ghassan Hage. Yet, for the Han racial nationalists, this act of lovemaking threatens to render the Han race lifeless as the alluring yet poisonous bite of a werewolf ultimately proves fatal. Rather than harassing patriotic sites like *Hanwang*, the Hanists call on the authorities to act quickly in banning *Wolf Totem* and outlawing the type of "reverse racism" (逆向种族主义) that undermines national solidarity and harmony.

HAN CYBER-NATIONALISM

Despite the sheer lunacy associated with this idea of Han racial genocide, the online hate-speak generated by *Wolf Totem* and the growing resentment of minority privilege shows signs of spilling over onto Chinese streets, with the recent race riots in Lhasa, Shaoguan, and Ürümqi an important reminder of how Internet rage can whip the marginalized and socially disposed into bloody action. The authorities in China have thus far proven effective (if not ruthless) in cracking down on racial violence after the fact, but current legal regulations and their implementation fail to go far enough in outlawing and prosecuting cyber-racism. Current laws governing the use of Chinese cyberspace explicitly outlaw any communication that "injures national unity" or "provokes hatred and discrimination among nationalities and injures national solidarity"; yet one can still find numerous examples of *minzu*-based hate-speak on the Chinese Internet.



Li Minhui 李敏辉 (aka Li Li 李理) the 34 year-old co-founder and current administrator of Hanwang.

Hanwang and other Hanist sites were temporarily "harmonized" (被和谐, viz "closed down") after the July 2009 [Ürümqi Riots](#) that left nearly 200 people dead. But this site and other web forums quickly reopened. Today, *Hanwang* boasts a thousand daily postings and over one hundred thousand registered members, making its community only slightly smaller than the leading White nationalist portal [Stormfront](#).

In the absence of a frank, open and robust exchange on ethnic issues in the Chinese academy and media—where a variety of voices and different perspectives can be held up to rational public scrutiny—the influence of these extremist views are likely to increase. China's Internet Revolution has certainly broadened the scope of public discourse, but not all forms of cyber-activism contribute to

liberal thought and action. The dynamic nature of the Internet and the patchy coverage of the state's censorship regime leave "dark corners" where the vitriolic howl of Han nationalists goes largely unanswered but not unheard.

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